

In the name of our risen Lord Jesus, welcome my fellow early risers to this garden of death, which on account of Jesus' resurrection it shall become a garden of life:

Christ is Risen! He is risen indeed! Allelujah!

Jesus said to the believing thief on the cross next to Him: "Today, you shall be with Me in paradise." But Jesus' lifeless body was taken down from the cross and placed in a grave in what was called a garden, not hardly paradise. The thief's body was likewise taken down from his cross, placed in a grave, again, not paradise. So, what did Jesus mean? Their souls, vacating their bodies at death, would be together in heaven awaiting resurrection. Jesus' body rose 3 days later, while the thief's still awaits his.

The souls of many, if not all of the bodies surrounding us this early morning hour, are also experiencing paradise, but not their bodies they are asleep in Jesus. Yes, we try to make our

Christian cemeteries appear garden-like, even the pagans do that, trying perhaps to capture what we envision the original paradise, Eden, was like. But this is not paradise!

We shall now consider our text describing in more detail the paradise that awaits us based on the work of our crucified and risen Lord Jesus, the Apostle John writes:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be His people, and God Himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."

Based on these words from Jesus' revelation to the Apostle John, we know how Jesus' words to the thief become complete: *Now you will be with Jesus in paradise with your soul, Then ... You'll See Jesus in Paradise with Your Very Own Eyes.* So, when we hear the words of John: "I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away" understand what is being revealed to us. On that last day, when Jesus returns in all His glory with His holy angels, the Creator of all things will destroy what we know is the earth and the sky.

But first as we read elsewhere, the dead in Christ will rise with their bodies, be united with their souls. Then believers still living on earth will have their complete beings, bodies and souls, rise to meet them in the air at our Savior Jesus' right hand. Imagine if these homes surrounding this cemetery still have occupants on that day. As they stand at their kitchen windows, they are going to see this all unfold. If they are counted among the believing saints themselves, they will meet the bodies and souls of those rising out of these graves. On the other hand, if there are any unbelieving bodies they will rise too, but not to life, rather brought to the left hand of Jesus for condemnation. Any unbelievers in these homes will meet with them as well.

Then the earth and the sky as we know it will be destroyed, and new heavens and new earth will, we think, be made from the matter of the first creation. "Behold, the dwelling place of God is *then* with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be His people, and God Himself will be with them as their God." Paradise will truly be restored for God's people. The new and everlasting Garden of Eden, if you will. Hell will not be found there. It has already been created for the devil and his evil angels and all unbelievers, with their bodies and souls will reside there tormented everlastingly.

Paradise will be marked with a new order in this new heavens and new earth: "[God, for Jesus' sake] will wipe away every tear from *our* eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." The promise of all things being made new in Christ will be complete. What started with us being born again in this life through Christ will result in the full life with our bodies and souls in this magnificent paradise.

While still in this old order of things we often shed tears of repentance. When we come face to face with our unrighteousness our self-righteousness melts before it. We then only have one safe refuge, the blood and righteousness of our risen Lord. In Him our sins confessed need and receive in abundance the forgiveness of sins.

Now we live here with all our tribulations, but then in perfect harmony with God for all eternity. Jesus appeared first to Mary Magdalene. Her eyes were filled with tears and did not recognize Jesus. She mistook Jesus for the gardener. But when she recognized Jesus calling her by name, she wiped the tears from her eyes and saw that it was her risen Lord Jesus. Job made a similar confession about the day of his own resurrection, words that form a favorite Easter hymn among many Christians today: "I know that my Redeemer lives, And He shall stand at last on the earth; And after my skin is destroyed, this I know, That in my flesh I shall see God, Whom I shall see for myself, And my eyes shall behold, and not another."

We may try to make these sad places collecting dead bodies into garden-like settings, but in the end, it is only a suggested hint of what is to come. Many of you may recall mourning the loss of your loved ones in this very place, moved to tears thinking of life without them. But we are currently living in the old order of things. By God's grace you have been made new in Christ, born again unto life everlasting.

Paradise is what Jesus secured for you by His suffering, death and resurrection. While living in this old order of things yet in the midst of our many tribulations, you regularly gather here to encourage each other with these words of resurrection and life in the name of Jesus, our risen Lord. But in the new order to come at Jesus' return, you shall rise to live. You shall all see face to face, not in sadness but with eternal gladness. You shall behold your Savior Jesus Christ, and each other with glorified bodies like unto His. And you will be with that repentant thief on that day in the paradise of the new heavens and new earth.

Look around you today, see all these believers in the crucified and risen Lord Jesus, you will be with them too just as our Lord promised us all. Greet each other again this blessed morn with joy in anticipation of the final *gettin' up mornin'* which will be filled with even exceedingly greater joy for the sake of our resurrected Lord Jesus.

The Lord is Risen! He is risen indeed! Allelujah!

*Rev. Glenn Obenberger, ELS President
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For the Sunrise Service
In Parkland Ev. Lutheran Church Cemetery*